

- *Tugging an earlobe*
- *Making a “T” with your hands (like “Time out”)*
- *Making an “X” with your arms*
- *Covering your eye or eyes*

Downside—The “offender” must see the person sending the signal to receive it. That won’t happen if that person is breaking an Agreement like “Practice being present” by checking their email or intensely engaging in a side conversation with their seatmate. To remedy this, you can add a gentle reminder, as well as the signal.

3. Use a prop as a silent signal. Some groups use red cards to signal that an Agreement has been broken. (One is given to each member of the group at the beginning of the meeting, and upon a need, the card is held up like a “stop sign” used by a school crossing guard.) When the offender is no longer breaking the Agreement, the red card is put back on the table. Other groups use flags or handkerchiefs in the same way. I’ve heard of groups who choose to put a bowl of lightweight red foam balls in a bowl in the middle of the table. When someone breaks the rules, that person is pelted by the others in the group.

Downside—props can be distracting and disruptive (particularly if you are using the red foam ball method). Once a meeting has been disrupted, it can be difficult to bring everyone back to the correct mindset.

4. Appoint a rotating “Process Person.” To avoid the facilitator from having to always point out Agreement violations, some groups assign one person in the group to provide “gentle reminders” as well as make notes about how the group is working together in general. This post is rotated every meeting, so all group members take on the process person responsibility at some time during the school year. Sometimes the process person will immediately respond to Agreement breaches by issuing gentle reminders. At other times, they will list out what Agreements were broken and how many times, and report back to the group at the end of a protocol or activity.

Downside—Not everyone is comfortable being a process person, and as a result, may not bring attention to any broken Agreements. If this happens, it could cause frustration in the group with the agreement breakers and the process person, as well.

Clearly, establishing trust among the members of your CFG community is the best way you can ensure that your group’s selected Agreements will be honored. Without trust, members might feel resentful, attacked, and/or defensive when reminded that they have broken an Agreement. Keeping your Agreement List as “a living document” will also go a long way to making sure that your Agreements will help nurture an environment that allows each member to do their best work when working in their CFG community. 🍃

Friendly critics and Critical Friends in South Carolina

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Take the Lead was the theme of the 2016 (South Carolina Association of School Administrators) SCASA i3 Conference in June in Myrtle Beach. President George Ward challenged the membership to be a role model; to mentor someone; to enhance our leadership and to be a change agent. Leaders in Lexington School District One take these challenges seriously and have spent the past year engaging in leadership through the lens of a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Model to enhance our leadership skills.

We selected the Critical Friends Model as a strategy for developing the leadership capacities outlined in our professional learning design for school and district leaders. In 2015-2016, district-wide professional learning was restructured to design common areas of focus and “systemness” (a term from Michael Fullan’s *The Principal*) across schools while still allowing schools the autonomy to customize professional learning. The district professional learning design includes aligned learning targets for teachers, instructional coaches and school and district leaders. Learning targets were intentionally designed



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as “we can” statements instead of “I can” statements, emphasizing the important role collaboration plays in continuous improvement. (See Fig. 1)

Leadership is a lonely proposition. We cannot do our jobs alone. We must surround ourselves with good people and build positive relationships with them. David Brooks, author of *The Road to Character*, reminds us “that people are much stronger than they think they are when in pursuit of their telos, their purpose for living. As Nietzsche put it, ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how’.” Critical

Friends Groups combat the loneliness of leadership, allowing for purposeful work in a trusting learning community.

We are excited about our CFG work as it represents the basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving schools and increasing student achievement. These efforts are leading to increasing leadership capacity of our principals, teachers and instructional coaches. So what the heck is a Critical Friend? You may be thinking this is surely an oxymoron. How can one be a critic and a friend? Let us explain.

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, “A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.”

Similarly, Critical Friends Groups are typically groups of 8-12 colleagues who “are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (or protocols).” CFGs meet for at least two hours monthly and have unguarded conversation as they think about critical incidents of practice, examine student work, identify school culture issues, and challenge each other’s thinking. A trained CFG Coach facilitates the group’s work. The facilitator uses protocols to provide constructive feedback designed to push deep thinking. Trust is the ultimate human currency in a CFG.

In Lexington One, principals, assistant principals, and members of the Instructional Services Team have participated in Critical Friends Coach

Figure 1

Teachers	Instructional Coaches	School and District Leaders
<p>As a TEAM, we collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design clear learning targets to establish expectations for student understanding and enable students to monitor their progress and assess the quality of their work. • Assess students continually to measure progress towards the learning targets. • Analyze data and adapt instruction to address students’ needs. • Design collaborative opportunities for students to actively engage in learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We implement the seven core practices of student-centered coaching: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting goals for student learning (standards-based, engagement, and/or behavior goals) • Using standards-based learning targets • Using student evidence to co-plan instruction • Organizing coaching through cycles • Co-teaching with a focus on effective instructional practices • Measuring the impact of coaching on student and teacher learning • Partnering with the school leader • We use strategies to engage in reflective dialogue with teachers. • We develop strategies and tools for building the capacity of teams. • We develop strategies for creating a collaborative school culture. 	<p>Develop capacity as a lead learner, system player and change agent.</p> <p>As LEAD LEARNERS, we:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate and develop teams to build collective capacity in pedagogy. • Provide teams of teachers with descriptive feedback and coaching. • Analyze and use data to monitor student and teacher growth relative to established student growth targets. • Plan and facilitate effective professional learning. • Create a learning culture for new pedagogies (deep learning tasks, collaborative learning partnerships, and use of digital tools and resources).

Administrators, what’s on your mind?



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training through the National School Reform Faculty. As a result, leaders are consistently using strategies to build trust, plan effective meetings, facilitate meaningful professional learning, and guide communities of learners to nurture seed ideas and examine student work, professional practice, and dilemmas. Now that leaders have a solid understanding of CFGs, the work is unfolding to extend to teacher leaders.

So, what has this work meant to us in Lexington One? Ultimately, we have grown as reflective practitioners through our work with the National School Reform Faculty and Critical Friends Groups. Trust building activities are done with purpose; shared agreements are established to serve the work at hand; a common understanding exists regarding how to give and receive feedback, protocols are selected more thoughtfully; we support team members by facilitating protocols for one another; and, we genuinely enjoy collaborating. (See Fig. 2 in next column)

Figure 2 What do Lexington One leaders have to say about Critical Friends training?

- » **It was wonderful! For the first time, I was taught how to use protocols meaningfully. They are no longer protocols but ways of doing things to maximize ALL voices. (Secondary principal)**
- » **I thought working through the protocols was most helpful. There have been lots of times where I've been planning PD or planning something for a faculty meeting that I've felt like the use of a protocol would help the process. Not having ever been trained on the use/variety of protocols, I was just out of luck. Not anymore! :-)** (Elementary principal)
- » **Loved it. Very helpful, especially in identifying the most appropriate protocol. I believe it is a positive way to build trust and safety among your colleagues. Be more collegial than congenial. (Secondary principal)**
- » **Being a new principal, it gave me wonderful ideas on how to start my school year and build culture with in my school. Most importantly it gave me a structure to hold professional development in which all involved would have**

a clear understanding as to “why” we are doing what we are doing. I plan on ensuring that our PD meetings this year are focused and meaningful through the use of protocols and team agreements. (New elementary principal)

» **The protocols that were presented can be transferred to use with students to broaden their thinking. It also gave me tools to think through challenges and broaden and deepen our thinking as a leadership team and faculty. (New secondary principal)**

Our new superintendent, Dr. Greg Little, has established commitments and expectations for leaders in Lexington One. These commitments include growing, nurturing, and cultivating leadership and creating a culture of collaboration, both of which are supported by our work with Critical Friends Groups. An organization's success lies in the capabilities of its people. The measure of our success will be the quality of the leaders we develop to come together as critical friends and tackle challenging and dynamic issues in education. From here we will grow. 🌱

NSRF protocols in the classroom

Discussing democracy with high school students

It seems that the meaning of democracy has become more poignant for all of us since the US presidential election. I find myself in good company with my students as we seek ways to be more involved and to have more voices heard in our government. My reflections on “democracy” as a way of sharing power and giving all participants voice connect directly with how and why I value NSRF protocols and CFG work. In this article, I aim to share how a protocol helped my

students discuss their ideas of democracy in a democratic way.

I am fortunate to work at a school founded on democratic principles. However, the power dynamics of any school, dictated by age and adult legal responsibilities, can be difficult to translate to a democratic ideal where all voices are represented equitably.

The tension between the responsibility of our school institution and the individual needs and desires of our



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students becomes substantial in our high school, where teenagers are ready and willing to take on adult roles, but are often frustrated in their attempts. Reflecting recently on these frustrations led me to create a micro version of a CFG community with some of my students. My goal was to tackle our questions about democracy (on both a grand and a small scale) as we all wrestle with how to make democracy work (both in our country and in our school).

Democracy at Harmony School

Harmony School, in Bloomington, Indiana, is a small preK-12 independent school with a mission “to prepare young people to live in and contribute to a heterogeneous democratic country.” One of the ways we try to accomplish this mission is to model democracy within our school. We also aim to reflect heterogeneity in our student population, with tuition determined by a sliding-scale or payment-in-kind. Students participate in regular meetings with their multi-age classes to make decisions about issues from field trip destinations to what kinds of juice to put in the vending machine. Each grade also has representation in the school-wide Solidarity committee. At the high school level, students elect members of an Advisory committee for academic and social support, and a Student Selection committee for admissions. At the faculty level, teachers use a consensus-based approach to make decisions about issues from the school calendar to allocation of school funds.

Of course, the above description is an over-simplification of messy, complex work of the living democracy at Harmony School. We all struggle with the questions of how much power teachers should have over their students, or over administration, for that matter. For example, students don't get to vote on my curriculum standards or banish all homework. But we teachers do our best to incorporate a lot of choice into our lessons, we individualize many assignments, and we use protocols in our classes to generate feedback and allow for equitable participation.

Modified Microlabs

Since the U.S. elections (both the primary and the general election), Harmony teachers and students have spent a lot more time discussing democracy than in previous years. While national politics may dominate many of the hallway conversations, there is also an underlying question of how our school can meet our mission to prepare our young citizens and future voters. I was eager to use the current teachable moment in our country's history to hear from our students how they understand and relate the political spectacle of our national democracy to our tiny “democratically run” school.

I recruited volunteers from across the high school to participate in a protocol on what democracy means to

them. I gathered a group of eight students in our staff lounge for an afternoon and created a micro-scale Critical Friends Group among them. In our two-hour timeframe, we established Group Agreements, ran a modified **Microlabs Protocol**, debriefed and – of course – had snacks. Participants ranged from 9th-11th grades and included representatives from the various school governance committees, as well as students that had transferred from other schools.

To modify the Microlabs protocol to be more like a group discussion, I did not subdivide the small group into triads. Students shared their responses to the entire group, with the option to pass and a maximum of one minute per response. Most students did not need an entire minute to share the thoughts and ideas they had written during the silent reflection steps. While I was sure to allow a few moments of silence after each person shared, I did not follow the protocol guideline of preserving an entire minute for each student. This could work for a group of up to ten participants. A key aspect to the front-loading of the protocol was to invite students to share only when it was their turn, but to write down all their thoughts, as well as their questions and comments for each other in the small notebooks I provided.

To generate the questions for the different rounds, I followed advice of the **Microlabs Example Questions** and asked the students first to define the topic, then to describe their experiences with the topic, and last, to share their ideas and suggestions for the future. Because I wanted the participants to reflect on democracy at both the national level, and at the level of our own school, I expanded the protocol to four rounds with four questions. What follows are the questions and my notes of the students' responses.

What does democracy mean to you?

- » **Democracy is a type of government in which no one person can overrule.**
- » **In a democracy even the lower class can challenge decisions if they engage.**
- » **In our country democracy doesn't work, but at our school democracy is 'power to the people.'**
- » **Democracy allows people that are closest to the issues have the power to change them, so it can be a practical way to deal with issues.**
- » **Democracy means people's choice.**
- » **Democracy gives people power to have what they want.**

What roles do schools play in a democracy?

- » **Schools should teach ways to be involved in democratic government.**
- » **In a working democracy people can choose not to be involved, and**